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Chapter Nine.

Wesola Street in Lodz

In the first half of February1945 my army unit was withdrawn from the first offensive line for a short rest and I was permitted to visit my birth place-the city of Lodz. I was hitchhiking military vehicles going in my direction and reached Lodz in a few days. What I found in my home was terrible. The house on Wesola Street where we used to live was entirely empty. It was in the area of the Ghetto, whose last few hundred remaining inhabitants were driven out by the occupants in the fall of 1944. I entered the room that I left in 1939. No living soul! I knew that my parents left this place in the beginning of 1940 before the Ghetto was closed and moved to Kamiensk. Nevertheless, I expected that any survivor from our family would certainly return to this place.

On the floor were laying many pieces of paper. I looked through some of them for clues what happened here. The only interesting information was a letter from Mr. Zylberszac, the neighbor that we escaped with in 1939. He left in Lodz his wife and two daughters and intended to find a place in Bialystok in the Soviet occupied territory and return to bring them over. Apparently, he managed to come back, but could not return to safety. The letter was addressed to the head of the Ghetto Mr. Rumkowski in which he was asking for a job as a guard.

The furniture in the room, or what was left of it, was ours. I was mainly interested in the wardrobe. On top of it I left a copybook containing historical postcards depicting portraits of all 40 Polish Kings and famous battles and their heroes, which school children were collecting for history classes. What a surprise! Nobody removed my treasure from the exact place where I left it. Unfortunately, I did not take it whit me to the army unit and I lost it forever. Clearly this was not my biggest loss.

When I left this place I still had hope that my people will return one day. The enormity of the Jewish tragedy could not be comprehended at that time. The information conveyed within the Polish Army was very limited. I am not sure that while participating in the operation across the Vistula River in the fall of 1944 to help the Warsaw uprising I knew what happened to the Warsaw Ghetto upraising more than a year earlier.

I had another opportunity to visit Wesola Street in the beginning of May 1945. To my astonishing surprise I could not find any houses on Wesola Street. What happened, where did the buildings disappear? Soon I learned that after my first visit rumors were spread that one could find treasures in the abandoned Ghetto houses. Poles decided to dissemble all those buildings in search for the loot. In May the place was completely destroyed. What the Germans did not do the Poles themselves did. It was a shameful act of greed and disregard for the memory of their Jewish neighbors.

Now after being discharged from the Army, I returned to Lodz again. The place looked strange to me. All the familiar faces were gone. It was May 1946-a sufficient time for the city to recover from the war and for the survivors to come back. Nobody from my family was among the few thousand Jewish survivors. All my hopes that maybe a miracle will happen and I will see them again were ultimately dissipated. It became abundantly clear that almost all the Jewish communities of Eastern and Central Europe were annihilated. The life, tradition, culture and vitality of millions Jews who lived in that part of the world was eradicated forever. It was not a

temporary loss that could be restored over time. Never will this Jewish life reappear in this part of the world or, for that matter anywhere else.

I feel compelled to leave an eyewitness testimony about that lost Jewish life as seen by a boy in a poor neighborhood in the city of Lodz. I recall those years with a great dose of nostalgia. After all I was growing up there, going to school, playing with other children, working and learning to understand what happened around me.

Wesola was a short street in the city of Lodz. It did not resemble any exciting street of the large metropolitan cities of Europe. The city itself is not among them either. Lodz was a large textile city, but the area where Wesola was located was poor, without any factory or even a decent grocery store. It was a dead end street and this adjective fits the street well because at its end was a Jewish cemetery. Everybody who knew the street wondered who came up with such a name which, when translated from the Polish language means "merry". The author probably tried to poke fun. Actually many years ago it was called "Smutna" ("Sad") until somebody changed it to "Wesola"

By the time our family lived there the cemetery was already closed. However, in summer time inhabitants of the nearby area used to go to the cemetery treating it as a recreational park. Children used to roam around the graves enjoying the fresh air and the shades of the luscious greenery of the trees and shrubs.

The buildings inside the old cemetery were transformed into a psychiatric hospital. For that reason the gate to the cemetery was usually closed in order to prevent dangerous patients from leaving the hospital premises. Whenever weather permitted a group of patients was turning the water pump at the cemetery yard. They wore gray hospital cloths and for several hours daily were performing their work silently. Since the well was locked they did not release any water. These were the non-violent patients. When the cemetery was used as a park in hot summer days those patients were not working in the yard and the gate was opened to the public.

As a reminder of the cemetery's past from time to time an ornate funeral cortege would leave the main gate and drive through Wesola Street. Two beautifully dressed black horses usually drew it, lead by a man in a black coat and a cylinder on his head. Whenever four horses drew the cortege we wondered what famous or rich Jew is going to be buried this day in the new Jewish cemetery far away on Brzezinska Street.

We lived in the house #8. It was a two story building as many others. Four families lived on the first floor, only one was Jewish, while four Jewish families lived in single rooms on the second floor.

Zelig-my best friend in the building- was of my age and lived across from our room. His father was a tailor. He had two more grown up brothers and two sisters all of them working with their father. They were manufacturing garment for the elegant stores on Nowomiejska Street, Plac Wolnosci and Piotrkowska- the main street in Lodz. Their usual workday lasted from early morning hours until late in the evening. One might think that they should make good money. However, from the way they lived (all in one room) it did not look very good. Zelig used to be hungry very often. He would stay at the stairs in front of their open room and repeatedly beg his mother for a piece of bread. And the mother did not give it to him. I do not know why. After all, bread was not expensive. It must have been a problem for her; otherwise she would have not allowed him to scream sometimes for hours for that piece of bread.

Our family was also poor. Sometimes we did not have a loaf of bread an entire day but we kept our hunger inside, never complaining to our parents because we knew that they are doing everything possible to find means to feed us. My parents had seven children and we all lived in

one room. We had several beds, a stove in the middle of the room in addition to father's workplace and mother's sewing machine. And the family was functioning; we had room for homework and tried to keep the place clean. All young children went to school and were good students.

At the rear of our building was a yard about 20 by 15 meters in which the Polish owners planted flowers in the summer. Near that garden was an outhouse the lower part of which was painted black and the upper-white. In the middle of the yard was a water pump and on the left side a stall for horses and a little shack at the corner. The Jewish owner of the horses had two platforms, which in the evenings were also parked in the yard.

Children liked to watch harnessing his horses in the morning and after returning from a day's work unhorse them in the evening. He had two different platforms: one was flat and the other had two convex doors covering the entire cart, which he used for delivering meet. The latter was about two meters high and we liked to go on top and jump down from it. However, the flat platform served us for better use. During hot summer nights it was difficult to sleep in the room. Children used to sleep on that platform. How sweet it was to stretch the legs there and fell asleep covered by the aroma of the flowers in the nearby garden. Early in the morning at about 5 or 6 o'clock one woke up fresh and content after a few hours of sleep. Unforgettable is the smell of those little flowers that open in the evening and leave their aroma in the air for a long time into the night.

Water we had to carry from the yard. Usually it was not a problem except in wintertime. At freezing temperatures spilled water created a huge ice covered area, which made it difficult and even dangerous to get the water. Since there was no plumbing in the rooms, we had to go to the outhouse in the yard. Most of the time before entering this place one had to knock at the door a few times to chase away the rats.

Sometimes in 1937 a new tenant moved into the shack at the far-left corner of the yard. It was a very strange Jewish family. The father apparently was a professional burglar just released from jail after serving a six- month term. He looked to us, children, as a very nice ordinary man. Apparently he decided to quit his profession but we did not see him doing any other work. His wife was working somewhere. Initially they did not have enough furniture and the couple was sleeping on the floor. For some strange reason I liked to visit them often. Maybe because of their daughter Edzia. She was a very pretty girl about 18 ears old. Edzia was always well dressed and often in the company of several young men. They adored her and I liked her too. However, I never followed her as the others did since I was much younger and no match for her. Despite my disadvantage I was more often privileged to visit her in their room. They had a radio, a rarity in our house, and we often listened to beautiful dance music from Toulouse, France in a dimly lighted room and Edzia lying on the coach. But we did not dance, I did not know yet how.

Edzia's older sister was even prettier. She worked at the Dishkin deli store on Piotrkowska Street. I loved to go there watching through the window how fast and elegantly she was cutting salami with a large knife. To each order of salami she added a little tube filled with mustard. This was the custom at the Dishkin store.

Although children could play together in summer time, winter provided little opportunity for them. Nevertheless, we liked the first snows, the conditions allowing children to create snowmen and the icy paths that invited skating competition among us. We didn't have skates, all one needed was a pair of leather shoes and there we went competing who can skate the longest distant on the icy path. This competition took place on the street since there was no sufficient room in the yard.

We used to play soccer but we did not have a real soccer ball. So we rapped a lot of rags, which we had plenty from the tailor on our floor and we kicked that ball as vigorously as possible and we had fun. No youngster on our street owned a bike. Even if one had had a bike he would not have been able to ride it because everybody would run after him begging to let him try it out. We did so whenever one of us got some money and rented a bike for a half an hour at the velodrom on 11 Listopada Street.

During summer time city regulation required sprinkling water on the streets several times during the day. In most streets it was strictly enforced but Wesola Street rarely followed the rules. Hence it was dirty, dry and dusty. Once in a while Mother Nature compensated for that. During one summer day heavy rain was pouring for several hours and the street was flooded. The water reached about a meter high and children decided to take advantage of that unusual event and take a bath in Wesola Street. I did that too. Nobody knew how to swim so we walked in that muddy water for quite a while. As a result I got many black spots all over my body. Naturally the water contained many impurities. But we had fun. After a few days the black spots disappeared.

I do not know whether it was a reflection of the times but many Jewish boys decided to play war. We scrambled together some money and over time assembled a significant number of toy guns, swords, belts, etc. and started training and attacking the enemies. The offensive unit was attacking the Germans. I do not think that anybody liked to play the role of the Germans but somebody had to do this. I remember my friend Lewkowicz from the building #4 was one of the officers. Zelig my best friend was also in that unit. Unfortunately I cannot recall more names from our "army".

We also had some other joyous moments on Wesola Street. Among those was the Passover holiday. I remember well my father dressed in a white "kittle" (toga) standing up during the traditional Passover Seder (elaborate holiday supper), raising matzos, holding them high and pronouncing:"hu lachmu anyiu"...("this bread of affliction that our forefathers ate when in Egyptian slavery"...). It was one of the most solemn moments of the Seder. And, of course, we asked the four questions to which father and accompanying readers of the Hagada gave a very long answer. But the wait was compensated by unusually good food and everybody had to drink four glasses of wine (children got small glasses).

And who can forget the unusual preparations for this holiday. Everybody had to clean out the rooms from anything resembling leavened bread. Some breadcrumbs were deliberately put at various places in the room so that they could easily be detected and removed by my father while reading some special blessing.

For Passover a separate set of dishes, utensils and cookware was required. Poor families did not have them. Hence they took advantage of the special teams that were coming to each Jewish yard with a tin barrel of boiling water into which all those items were put. After that hot bath they were pronounced "kosher for Passover"(meaning they can be used for Passover). But all these preparation had an additional, less religious, and maybe more important advantage. It compelled every family to do a thorough cleaning of the entire home.

Also for that holiday parents tried to buy new clothes or shoes for the children. The morning after the first evening Seder children would appear in the yard or in the street showing off all those new things. We also ate matzo outside the house. Invariably the Christian children asked for a piece of matzo. They loved it despite the vicious propaganda spread by our enemies that Jews are killing Christian children in order to use their blood in baking matzos.

A few other Jewish holidays were enjoyable. One was Purim during which Jews read the story of Esther and Mordechai that saved the Jews in Persia from the plans of the Jew hater Haman. On

that day Jews are allowed to have a few drinks of alcohol and get very merry. It was also the custom to send gifts to friends and relatives during that holiday. Messengers carried baskets of fruit, sweets and wine to their destination all over the city upon delivery of which they got generous tips. Little kids got small "gregors"- devices to drown Haman's name whenever he was mentioned in the reading of the story. Children put on masks and visited many neighbors singing a little song and being rewarded with gifts and money. Resembles Halloween but completely different content.

Once a year Jews erected temporary shelters for the Feast of Tabernacles. The shelter was made of wooden planks nailed on 2x2 stubs and the top was covered with branches of pine trees. There were about 15 male members from the building that ate holiday meals in the shelter in our yard for eight days. Even though most families in our building were poor the holiday meals were better than usual, maybe because they had to be exposed to the impression of all the neighbors. Since this holiday ("sukos") comes in the fall it was frequently raining and the meals were consumed while drops of rain were falling on the heads and into the meals. The tradition did not allow switching to the rooms even under heavy rain.

I liked very much Simchat Tora because of the ecstatic dancing of Jews with the Tora scrolls. It expresses the extreme joy of having finished reading the weekly chapters of the Tora and the start of a new cycle of reading. The dances were accompanied by singing of very joyous melodies by the entire congregation. Sometimes I had the impression that the dancers got so exalted and carried away that they would never end it. But they had to end their vivacious dances because the scrolls were needed for the next group since nobody should be left without participating in the dances. After each round a new group of worshipers was called for a "kupa" picking up the Tora scrolls and joining a new round of merry dances. I was waiting with anxiety for the moment when my father would be called to join. I have never seen him dancing before.

As many other streets Wesola had its share of solicitors. They followed each other according to a predetermined schedule. It is now difficult to imagine that solicitors would come to such poor neighborhood. No discrimination between rich and poor here. So they would come regularly and often would be unhappy with what they got, especially when it was a piece of bread or some leftover food. They preferred money. The street singers were a higher class of money solicitors. Not operatic voices but still singers. One of them I remember well because of his repertoire of Russian songs. He had a very sad one: "Na chto mnie mat' rodila" meaning "what for did mother bring me to this world"

Although Wesola street inhabitants were mostly Jewish a few Christian families lived there as well. One was our neighbor in a dilapidated shack at #10. On Saturdays, in summer time, our neighbor entertained the entire street with his songs. He would enter Wesola from Lutomierska Street singing on the highest decibels. We knew that he got paid that day and was drinking a lot of vodka. His family was also poor and was waiting for the meager earning to feed the children. Unfortunately a lot of it was spent on vodka. Apparently he did not mind because he liked singing.

In the year 1939 the central government disallowed the customary May Day demonstrations in the streets, but rallies could be held indoors. By that time I was enamored with the Polish Socialist Party (PPS). I decided to participate in a May rally at the movie theater Zacheta on Zgierska street not far from our place. There for the first time I was singing the "International". I still hear in my memory the thousand voices of Polish workers, members of PPS, singing the proletarian anthem. Many more times I had to sing that anthem but never was it as inspiring as it was at that rally.

In an election year the political war between the Socialist Party (PPS) and the semi-fascist National Democracy (ND) intensified. To every proclamation of the ND, which was preaching virulent anti-Semitism the PPS responded vigorously against their hate politics. The NDs were not satisfied with propaganda alone; they frequently turned to violence. They used to beat up the Jews that were sitting in public parks on a Saturday afternoon. However during the municipal election of 1937 (or was it 1938?) groups of NDs were using knives against Jews. I remember one day Pani Sabina-our Polish landlord-returned from a walk and was shocked what she had just seen: "Jesu Maria-she was screaming-they were using such big knives against the Jews" and she showed on her hand that the knives were as big as her forearm. The Socialist won that election but the Jews suffered.

When I was thirteen years old my sister Esther and a few of her friends organized in our room an additional workplace. They were sawing in fur around female boots that were fashionable at that time. Among the girls working with my sister was Edzia whom I mentioned before and another one called Lisowna. I thought that I was seriously in love with her. She was blond and tall, had a very beautiful rounded face, large eyes- a perfect picture of a girl to fell in love with. I adored her. I always wanted to accompany her home after they finished working in the evening. I frequently had to find excuses to walk her home by pretending that I need to go to a friend to solve some problem for my homework or to borrow a book. We were leaving exactly at the same time. She lived on Gdanska Street # 31 about three kilometers from our place. She did not mind my accompanying her home at night and I was the happiest boy on Wesola Street or maybe even in the entire universe.

In the span of six years (1933-1939) I attended two schools. First the Talmud Tora on Aleksandrowska 32 and since third grade the famous Rabbi Meisel Talmud Tora on Jakuba Street. I was a good student. I had a good memory, remembered prayers, and learned by heart all the 150 Psalms of David and some texts of the Tora (Old Testament). In higher grades, I tutored other students who fell behind or could not understand some part of the material outlined by the teacher. On secular subjects, I was very good in mathematics, remembered most history dates famous battles but not much about kings and who was married to whom in the royal families of various European countries. However, my attendance at school wasn't good. I missed many classes; initially due to illness (dysentery) which lasted several months and thereafter due to work in my uncle's grocery store. Uncle David, my father's youngest brother, inherited the grocery store from his parents. Actually, he took care of the business while my grandparents were still alive. The store was on Cegielniana 53 (previously numbered 85) in a relatively affluent neighborhood. Uncle David and his wife Sara had a son Jacob (Kuba). Since my parents were poor, they did us a "favor" inviting me to stay with them for lengthy periods of time. It started during the vacation period (July-August), and extended to several more weeks into the school term. Apparently Uncle David considered my presence to be beneficial to Kuba. From the start of the school year, Kuba would attend school regularly while Auntie Sara did everything possible to delay my departure, asking me to continue the various duties in the store such as cleaning, delivering merchandise, selling, etc. I missed many days in school.

There were some advantages of my work in Uncle David's store as well: I was making money. Since in those days there were no home refrigerators, customers asked to deliver fresh milk, butter, cheese, rolls, bread, etc. every day. The delivery was my duty. Wealthy owners of apartments usually rewarded me with generous tips. After several weeks or months, I accumulated a significant amount of money, which was a welcomed addition to my parents' meager earnings.

The work in the store was hard, especially in summertime. Uncle David and me used to get up at 2-3 o'clock at night, and walk a couple of kilometers to the nearest farmers' market on Zielona Street. He would look out for the best buys of produce and fruits and bring them to the place where I was waiting and then disappear again, while I was watching the merchandise. At about six o'clock in the morning, we were ready to load all the fruits and vegetables on a rented cart and return to the store. At 7 o'clock, when the city ordnance allowed opening the store, all the produce and fruits had to be nicely displayed with price tags attached to make the best possible impression on clients. The store had to be competitive, since across the street a similar one tried to undercut us in every possible way. There was also a competitor in the next building on Cegielniana 55, owned by a German family catering mostly to Germans, but they were not as aggressive as the one across the street. Auntie Sarah's parents, the Elbaums, had a similar grocery store on Cegielniana 59. When the store opened I had to run with the morning home deliveries. Later clients would come shopping for the afternoon and evening meals and other necessities

In the afternoon I had to go to various wholesale stores to buy different items, usually sour cream, cheese and butter. After those chores were finished, a lot of cleaning had to be done. Flour, sugar, salt, soda ash, etc. were delivered in sacks of 100kg, which had to be put in small bags of 1/2 or 1 kilogram and placed on the shelves. Finally, when at 7 o'clock in the evening the store was supposed to be closed, late customers would come through the back door. The police was strictly enforcing the allowed shopping hours. My duty was to stay in front of the store at the gate of the building and watch whether policemen were coming. If and when they came, I had to run quickly into the store and make sure that all "illegal" shoppers are out. Sometimes a policeman was faster than I was and the shoppers could not get out, which usually ended with a sizable fine for my Uncle. Aunt Sara would then become very angry, blaming me for the mishap. Uncle David was also not spared on such and other occasions.

After several months of working in that store, I would suddenly run home without letting them know in advance. I still have frequent dreams about escaping from that or other places.

I had good teachers. Mr.Magalif, the director of the secular school, was teaching mathematics; Mr.Lange-the Polish language and Mr.Hecht –geography. I fondly recall the geography teacher for his interspersing during the lecture about the Middle East a few Hebrew songs. He was afraid of doing this; nevertheless his Zionist feelings prevailed. At those lessons I learned to sing the Hatikva (future Israeli anthem) and "Techzaknu". These are among the few songs that I remember the words and melody to this day.

In those days, spanking students for any of misbehavior at school or for not preparing the homework, was the order of the day. The methods of punishment differed. In the religious part of the integrated school, one teacher would take the offender in front of the class, remove his pants, and administer ten or twenty blows with a leather belt on the boy's rearend. In our school this was called: "a pekl". It was hurting the offender and was intended as a warning to others. In the higher grades, another teacher kept swinging a leather belt over heads, trying to reach the target student who was hiding below the bench or behind other students. In the secular part of the school, the methods of punishment were more "modern" but no less painful. Mr. Lange used it infrequently, but when he got furious he would hit the student very hard. Many times students would actually faint or pretend fainting and the teacher would stay with them after classes asking for forgiveness, even offering money compensation. Mr. Magalif would hit the pupil's face several times with his palm and then start coughing (asthma) for several minutes, which very often ended the class for the day.

Madame Ginsburg cared about our lunches at school. She was the head of the kitchen. We

would line up at the appropriate time, pay 5 groszy (a very nominal price) and be let in for a good meal, usually dense soup, a small meatball and bread. Madame Ginsburg approached charities and wealthy Jews for donations, which allowed her to keep the price of a meal very low. If some of the pupils didn't have the 5 groszy, she would still let him in, asking to bring the money next time.

Wealthy Jews, in addition to altruistic donations, supported the school by requesting special prayers for deceased benefactors or their relatives. On those occasions, students from several classes would assemble in the director's office (the Menahels room) where an altar would be placed and the little cantor in my class would conduct the prayer. His voice was phenomenal. The prayer was very dramatic. It started with the words, "God full of mercy receive the soul of..."("El molay rachamim"....) This traditional burial prayer was rendered so beautifully that it still rings in my ears. I have forgotten many prayers and psalms that I knew by heart, but not this one only because of that little boy's singing. I am sure that his voice awakened in me the appreciation of vocal music that lasts until today.

Several colleagues from my class were singing in the Wolborska Synagogue choir. It was a mixed choir of young boys and adult men (Prof. Zaks-director) performing so beautifully that I liked to go their frequently alone, while father went to his usual prayer house. Paradoxically, the cantor in the same Wolborska Synagogue, when I attended services there in the late 1930s was not as good and markedly contrasted with that mixed choir.

In the fall of 1938, M.Kousevitsky –the famous cantor from the Tlomackie Synagogue in Warsaw--gave a concert at the Philharmonic in Lodz, which I was lucky to attend with my older brother Samuel. Kousevitsky's prayers were so much better than anything I knew in liturgical music at that time, that I was immensely moved. Kousevitsky still plays an important role in my spiritual life to this day. I will return to his story in a while.

In the middle of the 1930s father used to take me with him for Sabbath and Holiday prayers. Most of the time we went to a small prayer room on a street near the place where we lived. The prayers in this "sztibl" did not leave any lasting impression on me. However, from time to time, father would take me to the Rabbi from Tomaszow. The connection with the " Tomaszover Rabbi" is a complicated one. My grandfather on my father's side was called "Szymon the Tomaszover", which means Simon from Tomaszow. However, he was not born in Tomaszow as that nickname might suggest

Whatever the reasons, my grandfather was very close to this Rabbi. Maybe they studied together or they met to discuss difficult Talmud issues – since grandfather was well educated in this field. Be it as it may, Grandfather Simon was regarded as a close disciple and follower of the Rabbi. I do not recall my Grandfather attending prayers at Poludniowa 28 where the Rabbi lived and had his prayer hall. On several visits to my Grandfather I remember him being in bed most of the time. He probably died somewhere around 1935 at the age of eighty.

His fame in the Rabbi's circle lasted and it was partially transferred on to my father and myself. That is why we would go from time to time to the Rabbi's prayer house. Incidentally, my Uncle David, although shaved in tune with more modern Jews, was also a welcome participant at the Tomaszover Rabbi's place. He was often asked to lead the prayers on a regular Saturday because he had a very nice and strong voice.

After Saturday prayers, the Rabbi would invite my father and me to his private room, where he would inquire how father was doing and examine my knowledge of the Torah. I think he was pleased with what he heard from me, at least that was my impression at the time.

The visits to the Tomaszover Rabbi turned out to be of lasting value to me since they impressed me so immensely through my whole life. I have been thinking about him with

reverence. The reason for this is the authenticity of the atmosphere there and the sincerity of the prayers. I will never forget the Yom Kippur prayers there. They are always memorable to Jews because of their dramatic content. On that day Jews are being judged for their deeds and sentenced to live or die, while they atone for their sins and transgressions against the many laws and rules the Torah asks them to obey and are asking for forgiveness. The prayers led by the Rabbi were extraordinary. One was under the impression that he communicated directly with God. He was honestly crying, begging for forgiveness. He had a very deep velvety voice and used it absolutely convincingly in his dramatic appeal to God for the welfare of his flock. I think everyone participating in those prayers felt the same way. He raised us to his level of communicating with the Almighty. He brought us closer to God. In the middle of a prayer, he would suddenly stop. It would be very quiet at that moment and the feeling was that maybe now the heavens opened and listen to his and therefore our prayers as well.

The Tomaszover Rabbi had several sons that were at that time already well known rabbis on their own. One of his sons was a rabbi in Kalisz, the other I do not remember where, but I recall a moment when they had a reunion with their father. Among the worshipers they were legendary, because of their wisdom and intellectual capacity. When I saw them I had the impression that I see angels, heavenly people, not the ordinary ones I used to see in this prayer house. His youngest son was sensational. He did not have a beard yet. But his long corkscrew curls and his beautiful but pale face made an impression of an extraordinary person out of this world.

These memorable feelings the visits to the Rabbi made on me were magnified by the gatherings on Sabbath afternoons, when the Rabbi's followers would sit around a huge table and have supper together with their Rabbi-teacher. He would pass around some food and specifically mention the name for whom the food is destined; say a few words about this person and depart from this into some phrase from the Torah or Talmud, that he would interpret, comment upon and derive the proper teaching from it. Interspersed within the Chassidic (the Rabbi's followers) supper were prayers and songs intoned by the Rabbi and picked-up by the entire gathering. Rabbis were famous for composing a lot of these melodies, which were rather vivacious and made everybody feel good. This is part of the Sabbath tradition, to make one feel good, relaxed and happy. These suppers would end with the blessing of the division between Sabbath and the weekdays. The separation between the Sabbath and working days is a whole celebration in itself. It starts with a benediction and the lighting of a colored plaited candlestick, which is the first work allowed after complete Sabbath rest. The benediction is performed with a glass of wine, which is then used to extinguish the candle. Thereafter the electric light is turned on. According to tradition putting some wine from the benediction into pockets should bring a prosperous week.

This religious experience from my childhood remains in my conscious and is an important pillar of my life. I am glad that the Nazis were not able to eradicate it altogether. It survived in the New World and in Israel.

The other lasting foundation is the liturgical music, which I received from the Wolborska Synagogue choir and the famous cantor M.Kousevitsky. I was so moved by his concert in my hometown that it remains engraved in my memory forever. Suddenly, several years later while in the Soviet Union I heard over the radio that M.Kousevitsky was going to sing an aria from a famous opera in the Tbilisi Opera House (previous Soviet Georgia). That was the only time I heard him again and learned that he is alive and well. Apparently he was arrested in 1939 after the Germans occupied Warsaw but thanks to the efforts of many luminaries in the artistic world he was released and escaped to the Russian occupied part of Poland.

Many years later when I arrived to the United States I thought of finding records of his

liturgical music in this country. One day I learned that a famous cantor from Philadelphia, Szlomo Carlsbach, would be leading Friday evening prayers in a Trenton Synagogue in New Jersey. I decided to go. After the prayers I asked Szlomo Carlsbach whether he knows anything about Moishe Kousevitsky and whether I could find his records. Of course he knew and gave me the company name where I could buy such records. As a result, I have rediscovered the world of cantorial music. I bought many records of his prayers. When I played them for the first time I was overwhelmed in tears. It brought back that almost extinguished Old World. I realized then that at least the liturgical music is still part of me, and through it, I keep the bonds with my roots.

Reminiscing now my childhood and the lost world I came back to think about our decision in 1939 to escape from the occupied territories.

I wondered what Mother was thinking on that rainy November day when she saw my brother and me off to the safety of the Soviet Union? Of course she worried about our welfare in that strange world. This she told me many times when we revealed our plans to escape. But may be, she and the whole family must have also thought about the two strongest boys leaving them when we might be needed more than ever. And what did we think at that time? Many families stayed together in good and bad times. Many families went to the camps and gas chambers together.

Alicia Appleman-Jurman-the author of a moving account of life under German occupation-did not want to leave her mother but was persuaded by her to do everything possible to survive and tell the world what happened to their family and millions more.

Was our decision to leave a sign of bravery or cowardliness? This question can be asked now but at that time it did not cross my mind. I was not asked by our parents or siblings to stay with them. Leaving the occupied territories was considered a wise thing to do.

Jews should not have expected to have a sweet life under Nazi occupation but never could went so far as to think that the Nazi's goal was complete extermination of the entire Jewish population. Otherwise many more would have escaped and our position would have been more assertive in convincing the whole family to leave occupied Poland. Hence the logical answer to my query after we know what happened could be that I would have perished together with them. Would that have been a reasonable thing to do? Perhaps not, but it would have been moral. This is why these thoughts are so disturbing and painful.

What is the proper and humane way to honor our martyrs? How do we make sure that their suffering and tragic end is known to our families and future generations? Since I know nothing about the precise places and circumstances of their death I cannot even erect a symbolic plaque. I do not have any photos to recall how they looked like. These thoughts led me to the idea of learning how to paint portraits from memory. The results of my work are shown on the following pages.

Chapter Six.

In the Red Army. Back to Siberia.

My Third Escape.

In the spring of 1942 I volunteered to the Red Army. It was my hope that after enlisting and a short training period, I would join the struggle against the Germans. Unfortunately in my Soviet Passport the number 37 was written. I did not realize at the time that it indicates that I am a foreigner not having all the right of a native citizen. In this particular case it meant that the authorities should not trust me and enlist in the regular Red Army. Instead I was sent to the so-called "Working Battalions". They were under the command of "The General Management of Airfield Construction." (GUAS in Russian). These battalions were used during the summer months to build new airfields close to the front-line. From these airfields tactical airplanes would rise to assist advancing units or in the defense against German offense. In some other instances, those airfields were used for long distance air strikes. The planes would usually start at sunset and return after a long-range mission at dawn the next day.

In wintertime the airfields were serviced by the GUAS units, which essentially was limited to cleaning the airfields of snow during the day so the planes would be able to take off for those missions. We would get up early in the morning at 5 o'clock and march in columns to the airfield. There, after an hour of marching in very difficult snow conditions, sometimes loosing our way because the blowing snow would cover the narrow path along which we were supposed to march, we would end-up in the middle of the runway where the planes start. In such a case and it happened often, military men would shoot red rockets at us, so we would know that we were in a place we should not be. The direction from where the rockets came would tell us which way to go. It looked like a game between our columns and the military men shooting at us, but it actually was very dangerous to be there because this was also the time when the bombers would return from their night missions.

After arriving at the huge kitchen-barrack, we would stay in line for the hot morning soup and a piece of bread. The soup was usually very thin, a lot of water and not much substance. One has to remember that these were the worse times in the Soviet Union, when the country still suffered from the advances of German troops, especially in the Ukraine from where the Soviets used to get their food supplies. So our morning soup reflected that situation. Also, our food ration presumably was more meager than in the regular army units.

After this breakfast, we would go out and shovel snow away from the middle of the airfields. It was extremely cold and we suffered a lot. By the end of the day we would reassemble in the kitchen- barrack where we would get another soup or porridge and march back to the village where we were stationed. We did not have any arms, so our military training was minimal -- just to know how to march in columns. Nevertheless, the unit commanders tried to keep some semblance of military discipline with very meager results.

It is important to realize what kind of people these units enlisted. First were the foreigners. Even though a few years ago we were considered liberated Byelorussian brethren, now we were at best recognized as second class citizens, whom the regime did not trust to give arms and to allow participating in the struggle against the invaders. These units also enlisted people who in the past were accused of "counterrevolutionary activity" that is those who were jailed on the

famous paragraph 58 of the criminal code. They already served their terms and were now technically free. There were also children and close relatives of people who were considered "enemies of the people", i.e., those that the Stalin regime accused of anti-government activity. Not only were they put away in labor camps, but their relatives were also mistrusted and thus not accepted in the regular army. Hence, a significant part of the units' personnel were experienced labor camp prisoners who knew well the life and order of the camps. Quite often they would simulate illness in order not to go to work. No medical personnel except a few nurses and a paramedic, was available to confirm real illness so they could easily simulate it. They also knew all kind of tricks to get a high fever and thus be excused from going to work and at the same time remain eligible for the daily food ration. Some of those may have actually been sick but not recognized as such and without food they were rapidly slipping into complete exhaustion. Some of them would be taken away to hospitals or even be allowed to die.

The group consisting mostly of ex-labor camp prisoners would play cards all night and thus be unable to march to work in the morning. They adhered to very strict rules of the game (blackjack). The game was for real with money or other real things such as cigarettes, food rations, and even their wives at home if they had one. The stakes were sometimes extremely high and the atmosphere tense. Around the table in addition to the players were observers who got a lot of excitement without risking their own valuables. But they liked to stay behind a player and watch the cards as he received them and revealed to their own eyes in a very deliberate, slow manner to increase the excitement and also hide from the other players the true value of their cards.

Although the payment had to be made, the players were obviously not very honorable men. Some of them tried to cheat. On such occasions, a quarrel would erupt that sometimes ended in a serious brawl. During such moments, the non-players in the room (there were probably about 30-40 in one room), sleeping on two stories of plank beds would wakeup and in confusion try to understand what was going on. Sometimes we could get four or five such loud outbreaks during a night.

Under such conditions the winter of 1942-43 went by. In the spring of 1943 we were transferred to other places. In one of such transfers I met my brother Sam who was mobilized and incorporated into similar units that I served in. But we did not stay together for too long. My new job in the summer of 1943 was to operate by hand four excavating shovels, each one the size of a cubic yard.

After several weeks of lifting the handles of the four containers, a tumor developed under my arm, which brought me to a military hospital. Since we worked for the airforce, the hospital had a large contingent of airmen wounded in action.

If one wants to learn what a war does to people, he could participate in it or see some of the results of it in a military hospital where the wounded are treated. The minute I entered the hospital I went near an operating room where I saw a human being with two legs cut off by shrapnel and the body left almost unattended jumping on the operating table in the agony of pain and convulsion.

In the big hall there were probably one hundred beds very close to each other with very severely wounded servicemen. The odor from their wounds was terrible. Many of them were barely screaming, some of them without legs or hands, severe wounds in their bodies, begging to be killed so terrible were their pains and suffering. After a few days I got used to this horrible environment. My medical problem was insignificant compared to many others. In a few days the physician looked at my tumor, decided that it was not serious and promised that within three

weeks I would be back in good shape. He was right, the medication he applied worked well and my tumor started shrinking.

Since my legs were healthy, the hospital assigned me to assist the personnel in serving food to the wounded that had to stay in bed. This gave me a lot of exposure to wounded pilots and other servicemen, many of them officers. They used to tell stories about various combat situations. The most frequent were stories about the poor combat behavior of soldiers of different non-Russian so-called "national minorities." Muslim minorities were the worse. They would assemble around a killed Muslim comrade in the middle of the battle and pray. They were extremely poorly disciplined and the Russian commanders of such units had a lot of trouble with them and usually could not accomplish the mission they were charged with.

The other experience in the hospital was my assignment as an adjutant to a military prosecutor who had the rank of captain. The hospital was an evacuation hospital, which means that it had to be located relatively close to the front-line. As the front moved, so did the hospital, hence the name "evacuation hospital."

The captain prosecutor was sent to the hospital to investigate, in my mind, a rather trivial case of the disappearance of several gallons of wine that the hospital was supposed to use for severely wounded servicemen. My task was to stay at the door where the investigation took place and to run to call in some physician or administrator whenever the captain decided to confront the current interviewee with other witnesses. Since I was in the hospital for several weeks and moved around frequently, I knew a lot of the personnel or knew where to find them. The investigation always took place at night. The principal suspect was the director of the hospital, a man in his 60s. At about two or three in the morning, he would beg to end the interrogation for the day since he was very tired and did not know what he was talking about. The captain would, most of the time, satisfy his request, be very polite to the hospital director and ask me to accompany him on the way to his quarters.

My impression at the time was that the prosecutor really does not have a strong case to continue the investigation for so many days. But the captain was not in a hurry, the position he was in was very comfortable and he clearly was not looking for other assignments, especially if it would require participation on the front-line battle. It is interesting that even though he was accusing the hospital director of diverting illegally some hospital wine, the same captain would send me to a "friendly woman" who was serving in a regional military food supply warehouse with a whole list of food and drinks for his own use. But he was a nice man and very friendly to me. He allowed me to share the good food with him.

My goal, however, was not to stay in the hospital. I wanted to be sent to a regular unit of the Red Army in order to participate in the fight against the Germans. For this reason, when I entered the hospital I made sure that they considered me a regular soldier which my uniform, of course, testified to its veracity. To put it simply, I am so and so a Red Army soldier. At the admission to the hospital they did not make any attempt to check anything.

Upon my release from the hospital I had to make sure that they sent me to a regular Red Army reserve unit as they did with any wounded servicemen released from the hospital and being medically able to go back to a regular army unit. It worked perfectly on the hospital side.

When I arrived at the headquarters of the 8 Reserve Regiment of the Red Army located in the vicinity of Rzhev (the place was called Zapadnaya Dvina) a sergeant appeared and announced that they had a new order which said that people of Polish origin should be sent to the now-being-formed new Polish Army. Initially it was called the Wanda Wasilevska Army because she got permission from Stalin to form a new Polish Army, which would be under the strict control of

Polish Communists, of which she was one of their leaders.

I was not thinking too clearly and decided to admit that I was from Poland. My calculation was simple: Going to the Red Army, one may end-up fighting the Japanese instead of the Germans, while the Polish Army would certainly be engaged on the west front against the Germans. This calculation turned out to be right, but all the rest of it wrong. It was simply a trap and I willingly fell into it. But at the moment I did not know that and did not realize that such a possibility exists.

For several weeks I participated in regular training of the reserve unit. I was assigned to an sapper (engineering) unit whose task was to organize landings through rivers, build temporary bridges across rivers, lay mines or clear minefields before forward-moving units etc. This service is very dangerous in real combat situations but the training did not cause any serious suffering. It was still early fall, the weather was mild and I even enjoyed being there. The food was much better than in the "working battalions"; the real soldiers were delightful companions, especially in the evenings after the daily training. I would often be sent to the kitchen to carry to the barrack the daily ration of bread, sugar and hot meals. The procedure of dividing the bread and sugar was very elaborate in order to be fair to everybody and was well established. There were never any complaints, so well was it done. After the soldiers had their meals they would lay on their bunks, about 150-200 in all, and sing beautiful songs. Those were the most joyful and memorable moments of my service in the Red Army.

But this was not my goal as it was not the goal of most others in this reserve unit. The fortunes of the Red Army vastly improved by that time and the specter of kicking out the Germans from the Soviet territory a real possibility. For me, that meant closer to home, to my parents, relatives and my birthplace. And with a little luck I might even come back a victor and maybe save them.

After a few weeks of retraining the reservists would be assigned to regular army units and leave the 8th Reserve Regiment. Unfortunately, I was not among them. Several more weeks passed and I was still practicing how to lay mines while others were sent out to fight. Suspicions grew that something was wrong.

The sergeant who met us when we arrived at the regiment was also being held longer than the others despite his good health and perfect credentials. What is the matter with him? There were a few more of those kinds of reservists being held without explanation.

Finally, the sergeant learned from friends in the regiment headquarters what the problem was. He came one night after consuming a larger than usual dose of vodka yelling and screaming and swearing that he was a member of the Komsomol in good standing, always served his country, never deviated from the teaching and party line, and why do they discriminate against him? He wants to go and fight!

The problem was that they assembled five (so far) reservists who were either born in Poland or had Polish relatives and could not be trusted to be sent to regular Red Army units. The sergeant that lured me into that trap turned out to have a Polish grandmother. All of us he learned would be sent to Siberia to work in a coal mine. That was more than he could take. It was also a disaster for my plans. I was in a trap together with the sergeant that induced me to admit my Polish origin. What an irony!

For a few more weeks we believed that maybe the information obtained from the headquarters was wrong or inaccurate or would be changed soon. There were good reasons for such thinking. The measures taken by the military may have been justified by the behavior of the so-called Anders Polish Army, which was formed in the Soviet Union in 1942 and left in the first half of

1943 through Iran instead of participating in the struggle against Germany. But that was several months before. Now in the second half of 1943, Wanda Wasilewska -- the head of ZPP (Zwiazek Patriotow Polskich -- the Association of Polish Patriots) convinced Stalin that the new Polish Army to be formed under the strict supervision of Polish Communists could be trusted to participate in the war against the fascists.* Hence, it must be that the instructions in the 8th Reserve Regiment of the Red Army are obsolete and would be changed any time soon.

Our calculations were wrong, however. We were soon informed that we would be sent to the new Polish Army and that a colonel would accompany us to the place of its formation, which we knew was somewhere not far from Moscow. The colonel would have all our documents and would be our commander on the way to the Polish Army. The sergeant did not believe this story and we were inclined to believe the sergeant this time.

We were given new Red Army winter uniforms with woolen boots that strengthened our suspicion that especially the boots are for a Siberian winter rather than for service in the Polish Army where the uniforms, presumably, are Polish not Soviet. The Polish Army never wore woolen boots even in severe winters; we just did not know such footwear.

Finally, the colonel actually assembled us and we departed for our journey, ostensibly (yes, he was lying to the end) to the Polish Army. There were five of us including the sergeant. We were given rations and were off for a comfortable journey, this time in the regular coach car first to Moscow and then on the Moscow-Vladivostok train. We were telling everybody we could that we were joining the Polish Army and we are traveling to the place of its formation. Not long after we got in the Moscow-Vladivostok train people told us that they had met an officer of the Polish Army traveling on the same train in a nearby coach car. We immediately went to look for him and found him in a luxury compartment. We saluted him in the Russian way and he responded with the traditional Polish military greeting (Czolem). He was very pleasant, we told him our story and suspicions we have that we will not be released at the formation place of the Polish Army but will rather continue to Siberia. He pretended that he did not believe in our suspicion. He told us that he is traveling all over the Soviet Union with a mission to free Poles from places of detention or work. However, in the case we are not turned over to Polish authorities at the place of the Army formation, which was not far from where we held this discussion, he gave us the address of Wanda Wasilewska, the leader of the Polish Communists, and she will certainly make sure that we will be sent to the Polish Army.

The visit and talk to a real Polish officer and the promise he made to us raised our spirits despite our belief that we were being taken against our will to Siberia. At least there was now hope that we could extricate ourselves if need be.

Our information and suspicions turned out to be correct. We continued our journey to Siberia. The destination place turned out to be a coal mine in the Kuznetsk coal basin, the station called Kandalaki in the Irkutsk oblast, Trest Molotov Ugol -- deep in Siberia.

Upon arriving, the colonel with a thick pack of documents about us went to the offices of the coal mine management. I have always wondered what kind of documents he had about me. After all, my life was still short and nothing special happened to deserve putting it in such a thick dossier. Apparently, this was not the thinking of the Soviet authorities. It took them several months to assemble this documentation and I surmise that they did not leave any source of

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* The formation of this Polish Army was, of course, a matter of trust as a force that will help Stalin in ruling Poland. This must have been the real reason why he insisted on its formation and its use sparingly in the last stages of WWII.

information about me untouched. Didn't they have better things to do during this horrible war? It must have been that they were building- up a case, which would justify keeping me in the coal mine for a long time.

Some of these thoughts must have crossed my mind while I was waiting several hours until the colonel came out of the office with a verdict: Abram Broner will stay here in the coal mine. Two or three of co-travelers were told that they would be sent to the Polish Army.

To me this verdict was outrageous and I decided to act. First I went to a young lieutenant working for the military Commissar in town to appeal to him that I am from Poland and should be sent to the Polish Army the same way the other guys are. His response was rude. "You are not Polish, you are Jewish and this is not a Jewish Army we are sending the other guys to." "But listen", I responded, "I was born in Poland in Lodz, the part of Poland that has not been annexed to the Soviet Union; therefore, I should be treated as a citizen of Poland. If you want to check, please examine my language, I speak Polish the same way as those other people." My arguing did not convince him. The answer was the same, "Abram Mojsze Broner, the son of Israel. What are you talking about? You are Jewish and we will not send you to the Polish Army."

Then I decided to appeal to a higher authority. This time it was the Commissar himself -- a major of the Red Army. I reported myself according to the rules of the Red Army, which I still was in, and told him that I am young and I should go to the front where the fighting was going one because that is where the country needs me. (As you see, I changed my argumentation, thinking that it sounded so patriotic and appropriate that he would not be able to reject my argument.) "Yes," he said, "you are young but the country needs you here. This is our second front" (meaning front-line where the fighting goes on). "The country needs coal." "Yes true", I retorted, "but here you can use older people, women, those who cannot serve in the military and I belong to the fighting army." I thought that I got to him. He could not find any suitable answer. Then he turned to threats. "You immediately go to work and if you don't we will arrest you. And now leave this room." My visit was over and I was crushed.

I returned to the other people who were supposed to go back to the Polish Army. In the meantime a few more people joined their group, two of whom were young men released from prison the same day. All five of them were very good people, friends. They asked what I have decided to do. I had my decision ready. I even cannot remember at what moment I came to the conclusion. I said: "I am escaping. If you want me, I will go with you." "But how"? "I will manage." was my answer.

It is interesting how quick a person in danger comes up with schemes on how to deal with it. My scheme was simple. I would go to the train station and get myself onto the train as a helper to the girl who served as the car conductor, among whose duties was to heat the car and prepare tea for the passengers. There was a tiny heating unit at the end of the car, which even had a door, and the heating compartment could be closed so that an unsophisticated controller (of tickets or travel documents) would not look into it. Clearly my journey in the Moscow-Vladivostok train for several days let me learn how the railway system works.

But how do I get the girl to let me serve as her illegal assistant? The answer came immediately. I approached her and told her: "Look, you are getting a very limited ration of coal to heat your unit. I will bring you a lot of additional coal if you allow me to travel to the next large city Irkuts. The deal was made. She agreed. Now I had to deliver. That was easy enough. There were hundreds of cars loaded with coal. All I had to do was jump on top of a few cars and take some coal so as not to make it noticeable. The top of the coal cars was spread with white paint, so that any significant removal of coal could be seen. But I did not worry about this since

we were scheduled to leave the station very soon. Besides it was night now and the white paint was not visible from below even if somebody would check it. My only worry was not to be caught while I was removing the coal from the car or was carrying it to the heating compartment. Well you always have to count on a little luck. And on that night, I was lucky.

While traveling to the next city of Irkutsk I had to start thinking about the other tricks I had to apply to make my escape of more than three thousand kilometers succeed. The first leg of my escape went according to my plans. Yes, there were controls. The conductor was kind enough to close the door of the heating compartment right before the controllers approached it. She pretended that she was cleaning with a broom in the vicinity of the heating compartment. And it worked this time. Thanks to that brave Russian girl conductor whom I even did not know by name.

In Irkutsk the group of five Poles had to report to a city military office, where they were given rations for the next leg of the journey to Novosybirsk. A few more people were added to the group so that now there were seven legal and one illegal travelers. One of the new arrivals was a young Polish man from Warsaw, who was released from jail this same day. He was a very down-to-earth fellow. Yes, he said you could travel with us but remember you have to contribute some food to the group. You should understand, he said, the ration is not sufficient to share with you. We will share but you must contribute. And he gave me a lesson how to do this. "There are a lot of passengers traveling to prisons or army units or to relatives and have with them some food. All you have to do is to remove some of it from their possession. Simple?"

Yes, for him it was extremely simple. He knew how to do it; he had experience, he was jailed for stealing. But I have never stolen anything (please don't count the coal from the Kandalaki train station). However I understood that as much as I despised it, I must bring something. I had to keep with that group, which was the only means available to me to realize my broader goal.

On the way to Novosybirsk, where we had to change trains again, there were eight of us. A sergeant in our group was chosen the leader. He had all the documents for the seven legal travelers. He located himself at one end of the car with a few soldiers from the group. At the other end of the car a few more were located. The rest, including myself, was in the middle of the car. It was a very natural arrangement since those were open compartments with no assigned spaces. We took space where it was available. Quite often I chose to sleep under the benches. There was always room there and besides maybe I could "share" some food with a fellow traveler. Most of the time, whenever military or civilian controllers came in, I was sleeping under the bench. People would tell the controller that a soldier was there and his leader is at the end of the car. They never bothered me to get out from under the bench. They never tried to add up all the heads in the group to find out that there was one more than the documents indicate.

Somewhat more complicated was our adventure in Novosybirsk, where we had to wait for a train for several hours and the group decided to go out for sightseeing. I had an advantage over all the others in the group since I lived in Novosybirsk a few years ago and could be a good tour guide for them. However, if we walk as a group, the danger is that if a military patrol checks our documents, they might immediately discover that I am illegal. There was a way to take care of this danger -- first by walking in small groups at some distance and second, I had to watch whom the patrol would stop first and disappear. Or, if they would stop me first, I had to know the names of my other fellow travelers that were not being stopped and tell the patrol the name of the other person. Luckily, we did not need to use this scheme.

On the train from Novosybirsk we applied the same procedure of location as described above. Moreover, I have already learned from previous experience when to expect a military control.

Actually, it was the NKVD that did the controlling. They usually entered the train in large city stations. The control lasted several hours and by the time we reach the next stop, usually after some 200 km, they would have finished and leave the train. They would then enter a train going in the other direction.

But their return trip was not my worry. We had a few close calls though. At one time I was sitting together with a general from the NKVD who was traveling with us a whole day. We chatted about the difficult life of soldiers and our destination to the Polish Army. The control that came was very polite at the general's presence. I told them that I am going to the Polish Army (which was true) and that our leader had all the documents and is sitting at the end of the car. Fine, no problem.

Well, not exactly. The closer we came to our destination, the more I started worrying. I was almost sure that the Polish Army cooperates closely with Soviet authorities. Now technically, I was a deserter from the Red Army. The Polish authorities may not look favorably at a case of a deserter trying to enlist in the trustworthy Polish Army. In addition, what if they have the same policy as the Soviet authorities in the coal mine considering themselves a purely Polish army to which Jews from Poland have no entry? All these thoughts made me more nervous the closer we got to the place called Divovo about 150 km. southeast from Moscow.

We still had to change for a local train going to Divovo. In that train, almost all travelers were Poles heading to the Polish Army. My anxiety increased enormously. Here comes the hour of truth. Either I make it or I am returned to the Soviet authorities and punished for my "desertion".

The train finally stopped. Through the windows we saw men in Polish uniforms. We left the train and were immediately met by a junior officer who asked the newly arrived who is without legal documents. I looked around and saw a forest of hands raised. I raised my hand too and I knew that I am safe.

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